

# Twelve plead guilty in Davenport pot case

Twelve people pleaded guilty to conspiracy charges Wednesday in U.S. District Court in San Jose in connection with the August 1988 seizure of 10 tons of marijuana from a smuggling operation off the coast of Davenport, Santa Cruz County District Attorney Art Danner announced yesterday in a press release.

It was the largest seizure of processed marijuana in Santa Cruz County history, Santa Cruz County sheriff's deputies said at the time. The marijuana was identified as high-grade marijuana from Thailand with a street value of \$42 to \$54 million.

Deputies uncovered the smuggling operation after receiving a tip in the early-morning hours from a man who spotted a boat with its lights out in the water off Red, White and Blue Beach. A U.S. Coast Guard helicopter subsequently searched from the air while deputies on land found and arrested several people.

The Coast Guard also arrested two men found aboard the 50-foot fishing vessel used to bring in the marijuana. Dubbed the "Gold Dragon" case because of gold dragons on the packages of marijuana, the smuggling operation was sophisticated and included surfboards and a motorized rubber raft to help the men get the

marijuana ashore. The smugglers were from various cities, most of them in California but some as far away as Florida.

Pleading guilty in federal court to charges of conspiracy to possess marijuana with the intent to distribute were brothers Mikael Robert Ortiz and Brian James Ortiz. Also entering guilty pleas were George Joe Contaxis, Charles Lawrence Dunlap, Jody Wayne Ruud, Gary Carel Delange, Timothy Joseph Flaherty, Charles Robert Arth, Rex Alan Olander, Jonathan Reginald Hoine, Randall Scott Harrack and Suzanne Pearson.

The defendants were told that the sentence for a conviction on the conspiracy charges could carry a minimum and mandatory sentence of 10 years in prison. A maximum penalty under federal guidelines is life in prison and up to \$16 million in fines.

Indictments have already been handed up for two other defendants in the Gold Dragon case, who are awaiting an October trial date. Investigation will continue to focus on the identification, arrest and prosecution of other people suspected of being involved in the smuggling operation, Danner said.

— Jennifer Sasseen